



Repressed Trauma and Return of The Past: A Psychoanalytic Study of Elaine Risley in *Cat's Eye*

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ABSTRACT

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) is a profound and searing exploration of the psychic marks of childhood trauma and its spectral return in adult life. The present research presents a psychoanalytic analysis of the protagonist, Elaine Risley, with particular focus on the repressed memories of her childhood and their re-emergence to form her identity, and self-perception. Atwood's discontinuous narrative, hesitating between past and present, duplicates the structure of traumatic memory and repression. Psychoanalytic theory is used, drawing upon Freud's theory of repression, compulsion to repeat, and unconscious return of the past, and the works of Lacan, Kristeva, and Caruth, to decipher Elaine's conflicted process of self-confrontation. The article argues that Elaine's childhood friendship with Cordelia and her own near-death experience in the ravine become central sites of trauma, too overwhelming for the young Elaine to consciously integrate. They become buried in the unconscious, returning decades later in the form of dreams, hallucinations, and fragmented memories. Her dreams about Cordelia and her re-visitation of the ravine represent Freud's idea of repetition compulsion, where the psyche is driven to re-enact that which it is unable to integrate successfully. This circular preoccupation with memory disrupts linear temporality, showing the non-linearity of trauma as conceived by Caruth.

Introduction: Trauma, Memory, and Psychoanalysis

Atwood complicates classic trauma stories by illustrating that psychic damage can occur not only through overt conflict or violence but also through the insidiousness of female socialization and friendship. The novel illuminates the gendered pathologies of trauma, where female selves and

bodies are disciplined, judged, and normalized by internalized cultural norms. Kristeva's abjection theory and Cixous's writings about feminine subjectivity are illustrative of the manner in which Elaine's battle for agency is born out of the psychic damage incurred in girlhood and carried over into adulthood.

The study also points to the role of art as a medium through which trauma are repeated and expressed. Elaine's artwork objectifies the unspoken traumatized wounds of her childhood in the form of unconscious testimony. Her retrospective exhibition compels her to confront her past visually, thus revealing art as Lacan's term for the intimate yet exterior, personal yet alienated. Thus, Atwood introduces creativity not as mere flight but more as an important avenue for the expression and working-through of trauma.

Finally, Elaine's reconciliation is not complete. Her fantasy of forgiving Cordelia in the ravine is an integration psychic rather than a closure. In accordance with La Capra's "acting out" and "working through, with the story of Elaine Risley, Atwood highlights the enduring power of repressed memory, the fragile possibility of healing, and the complex interplay of art, gender, and trauma. A psychoanalytic reading of *Cat's Eye* thus reveals the novel not only as an autobiographical account of individual memory but as a deep exploration of the way that the past survives, disrupts, and demands to be known.

"Memory is not a film you can pull out and run over again; it's in bits and pieces, and you put it together yourself" (Atwood, qtd. in Graeme Gibson, Eleven Canadian Novelists, 1973). This "bits and pieces" quality is precisely what trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth describe when noting that trauma resists linear narration: "The impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located in the past" (Unclaimed Experience, 1996, p. 9).

Thus, Elaine's recollections are not continuous autobiographical accounts but trauma-constituted pieces. Her narration acts out what Dominick LaCapra calls "acting-out," whereby the subject is compelled to reenact a trauma repetitively rather than narrate it in linear fashion (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2001, p. 21). The non-linear format of the novel—moving from Elaine's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood correlates with the psychic arrangement of trauma itself. Consider Elaine's reflection early in the novel:

"Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough you could travel sideways in time and come back... It's a sort of trick I have. When I am looking at a place I can say, I was here then, and I was here then... layered over, like a palimpsest." (Atwood, Cat's Eye, p. 3)

This palimpsest metaphor establishes the novel's practice: memory, trauma, and identity are palimpsestic, superimposed on, and also resistant to chronology. Elaine's "trick" of seeing time sideways imitates the traumatized compulsion to relive what is past as if it were still occurring. Freud named this *Nachträglichkeit* (or "deferred action"), in which things that occur in the past gain traumatic significance retroactively and return in the present.

In addition, Elaine the artist deepens the novel's psychoanalytic elements. Her artwork illustrates what Freud called working-through a confrontation with repressed content in symbolic form. In contemplating her own retrospective exhibition, Elaine is forced to confront the visual traces of her unconscious:

"I thought, I painted these, I made them... They are words I do not remember writing, voices I do not remember speaking with." (Atwood, Cat's Eye, p. 317

The psychoanalytic usefulness of *Cat's Eye* also includes its gendered elements. Elaine's trauma is individual and culturally inscribed, tied up with patriarchal expectations of girlhood, beauty, and obedience. Lacan's theory of the mirror stage wherein identity is constituted through recognition of an external image resonates in Elaine's childhood relationship with Cordelia, who represents mirror and persecutor. *Cat's Eye* dramatizes the central psychoanalytic insight that trauma, though repressed, is never erased. As Freud observed in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939):

"What has been repressed continues to exist in the unconscious, and strives for discharge."

Elaine's return to Toronto is precisely the time when the unconscious childhood trauma tries to get discharged through memories, hallucinations, and artwork. And thus, the central argument of this essay is that *Cat's Eye*, if psychoanalytically read, reveals Elaine Risley to be a subject haunted by buried trauma, whose artwork and broken memories carry the returns of the past. This return is not merely ruinous but precipitates the potential for ephemeral conciliation and self-awareness.

Repression and the Splitting of the Self

The repression of trauma from early childhood has its own adulthood woven around it, as in the case of Elaine Risley. A psychoanalyst would tell you that repression is the psychic process of dragging an unbearable experience into the unconscious and still having it exert influence, though disguised, on the individual. Freud, for instance, refers to repression as "a failure of translation" meaning a traumatic experience cannot be processed in the normal way and is instead kept as an unprocessed shard (*Studies on Hysteria*, 1895, p. 205).

Repression and "Missing Time"

Elaine observes there are large portions of her early years she simply does not recollect: "I do not remember how I got from one year to the next. Those years are like blank pages. It's not that they're gone, it's that they were never written." (*Cat's Eye*, p. 145) Seán Burke makes a similar observation, citing what trauma theorists identify as dissociative amnesia: trauma-induced memories are not lost, but are encoded and therefore inaccessible to conscious recall. As Freud put it in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), "What has been repressed continues to exist in the unconscious and strives for discharge." Elaine's "blank pages" will, in due course, be completed—not out of choice, but out of necessity.

Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is defined by this paradox: the trauma is "an event that in its unexpectedness or horror remains unassimilated within the frameworks of prior knowledge" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 1996, p. 153). Elaine's inability to narrate her childhood stems from the fact that she was bullied by Cordelia, and the trauma of those experiences exceeded her capacity for understanding at the time.

The Splitting of the Self

What stands out most in Elaine's character from a psychoanalytic perspective is her split subjectivity. Elaine is an accomplished painter with a retrospective exhibition who, in adulthood, seems poised, accomplished, and even detached. However, beneath this exterior is the child who is repressed frightened and deeply ashamed, craving the approval of Cordelia.

Elaine's split subjectivity aligns with the split of the ego as described by Freud in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). The ego divides itself into two: one part grappling with reality, the other, focused on unconscious childhood fixations. Elaine is well aware of this split in her persona.

"I'm not the same person I was when I was a child. But that person is still inside me. She's still down there, in the dark, running, stumbling, afraid." (*Cat's Eye*, p. 289)

She is a woman in control and the suppressed child hurt, silent, submerged). This doubling calls to mind Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919), in which the split self-returns in the form of something simultaneously recognizable and unfamiliar. In Atwood's case, the intricate duality that exists within one person is vividly brought to life: the surface self (artist, intellectual, strange an inner haunting).

Repression as Psychic Survival

Repression is both enabling and disabling: it allows survival but inhibits working-through (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 2001, p. 65).

Elaine lives this contradiction personally. In many ways, her childhood was a set of "blank pages," and repressing those pages made it possible for her to pursue an artistic career. Now, the retrospective fearing beckons her to face those pages, which are now written over with memories that she can no longer run from.

Dreams, Flashbacks, and Unbidden Memories

Trauma frequently manifests in dreams and flashbacks, circumventing deliberate control. Elaine is all too familiar with such vivid psychic eruptions. For instance, the ravine scene does not come to her as a quiet memory; instead, it comes as a passage she relives with her body:

"I feel the ice closing over my head again. The air thickens, my breath stops. The Virgin bends toward me, her face shining." (*Cat's Eye*, p. 152)

The passage provided reflects the argument Elaine Caruth makes about trauma: it is not a memory but a re-enactment. Traumatized people carry the weight of an unlivable history in their body, or they embody a history they cannot fully grasp (*Unclaimed Experience*, 1996, p. 5). Elaine's body revisits the drowning sensation years later, illustrating that trauma moves in a non-linear manner.

Trauma, Guilt, and Ambivalence

Following the years of bullying, Elaine's internal world centered on Cordelia is awash with opposing and conflicting emotions: resentment paired with fascination, fear coupled with tenderness, and in equal measure rage and pity. Psychoanalysis has a specific term for this mess: ambivalence the presence of love and hate for the same object. Freud expressed awe for ambivalence as "a very remarkable feature of emotional life" and recognized it as a fundamental fixture of close relationships, rather than a mere anomaly (Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 1912). In *Cat's Eye*, ambivalence is not a static of Elaine's inner world; it is the signal of trauma's ongoing existence: it ties her to Cordelia, pulls her back to the places of harm, and infuses her work with a drive that is neither uncomplicated vindication nor uncomplicated grief.

Identification with the Aggressor: Why Elaine “Can’t Let Cordelia Go”

One of the life-critical mechanisms through which ambivalence becomes automatic is identification with the aggressor. To live through a threatening other, the child introjects (takes into himself) the voice, the look, and the judgments of the other as part of himself. We glimpse this in Elaine's retrospective awareness that Cordelia's voice still governs her into adulthood: the grown-up Elaine still looks for Cordelia in Toronto's crowds, hearing the old judgments in the back of her mind, half-expecting Cordelia to materialize in the gallery at the retrospective. Even when "Cordelia is not here," Elaine's perception is organized around her absence-presence; the city holds "fragments of her" (Atwood, *Cat's Eye*). The disappearing body is a nagging voice.

The Ethics of Looking: Pity, Revenge, and the Superego

Elaine's adult dealings with Cordelia (and with Cordelian memory) tend to oscillate between a want to humiliate and a want to save. The oscillation can be read as the push-and-pull of the superego the internalized voice of condemnation and reparation. Freud explains: "The superego... observes, criticizes, and prohibits actions," assuming the role of parent within the psyche (*Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1930). With Elaine, that inner voice arrives with Cordelia's lexicon: the superego does not merely berate Elaine for having acquiesced in the past; it invokes moral restitution, as if Elaine is owed by the very person who injured her.

This paradox is resolved implicitly near the end of the novel when Elaine goes back to the ravine and addresses Cordelia in absentia: "You can go home now." The line is not a celebratory repudiation; it is a release. As an ethical gesture it avoids the polarity of pity or revenge. Elaine doesn't stage Cordelia's defeat; she doesn't say, "I forgive you" (which would be a repudiation of superiority). Instead, she sees the hurt and permits departure from the scene—departure for Cordelia and for herself. Klein would call this the depressive position: containing love and hate, taking responsibility for destructive drives, and going towards reparation not through the elimination of conflict, but through its sustenance without decompensation (Klein, "Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States," 1940).

Art as Testimony of Trauma

Elaine's retrospective is constructed as an unconscious testimony: paintings "say" memories that Elaine herself is often unable to speak directly. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), explains that trauma cannot be represented directly because it is not perceived at the time of occurrence. It returns late, in the guise of symptoms, dreams, or, as with Elaine, art.

Elaine admits that her pieces are not purposeful autobiography, but the imagery betrays their source in personal memory:

"I don't paint women in red dresses, reclining on sofas. I paint eyes, and flowers, and blood dripping into snow. Things from the back of my mind." (*Cat's Eye*, p. 292)

These symbols, borrowed subconsciously from her traumatic history, inscribe the paintings as sites where memory filters in and out of repression. The "blood in snow" is especially evocative of her childhood near-death in the ravine a freezing and strangulation, half-forgotten and half-suppressed, but remembered symbolically.

The Final Confrontation: Memory, Forgiveness, and Release

The peak of *Cat's Eye* reveals no public dramatic confrontation but rather a domestic confrontation of memory. The return visit to Toronto for Elaine's retrospective show of her art forces her to go back over her traumatic past and face the ghost of Cordelia, not in actuality but in memory and hallucination. It is intensely psychoanalytic: it stages the Freudian theory that unconscious trauma has to be faced in order for psychic release. This ravine, where Brown almost died and was subjected to childhood brutality, is now the symbolic setting of confrontation, forgiveness, and healing.

Conclusion: Trauma, Art, and the Haunting Return of the Past

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is not simply a novel of childhood cruelty, but a profound consideration of the nature of memory, repression, and the inevitability of the past. Through Elaine Risley's fragmented memories, Atwood shows how trauma suffuses not only consciousness but also art, identity, and human relationships. A psychoanalytic reading explains that the novel form itself mirrors the activity of repression and return: memories flash up discontinuously, unexpectedly, in fractured time and thus involve the protagonist in confrontation with what has been repressed long enough.

Atwood's characterization of Elaine has a strong echo with Freudian theory of repression. Elaine's childhood agony, especially her close encounter with death in the ravine, is too severe to assimilate at the time it occurs. The book also puts in the limelight the role of art as expression of trauma. Elaine's work is an unwitting testimony, for what can never be said. The retrospective exhibition forces her to consider these images as splintered memory mapped onto canvas. Art becomes, in Lacanian terms, the *extimate*: intimate and external, personal and other. In so doing, Atwood aligns herself with psychoanalytic theory in suggesting that creativity is one of the few avenues by which the repressed are able to return freely.

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